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SOUTHERN ANTE-BELLUM SOCIETY

It is often said in Northern publications that the population of the South previous to 1860 consisted of a few slave owners ruling over many non-slaveholders. What are the facts? The total number of slaveholding families in 1850 were 347,255. Multiplying this by the proportion of persons shown by the census to constitute a family, it would swell the number to about 2,000,000. The average number of slaves was nine to each slaveholding family, and one-half of the whole number were in possession of less than five slaves. It thus appears that the slaveholders of the South, instead of constituting, numerically, an insignificant portion of the people, made an aggregate greater in relative proportion than the holders of any other species of property in any part of the world. The proportion which the slaveholders of the South bore to the entire population of the South was as a matter of fact, greater than that of the owners of either land, or houses, or any other distinct species of property anywhere in the Northern States.

But the actual slave owners by no means, represented those interested in slave property. The cities, towns, and villages of the South were so many agencies for converting the products of slave labor into the products of other labor. The merchants, doctors, lawyers, and all to whom the slave owners were indebted depended largely upon the slaves for the realization of their claims. Viewing the subject in this way, upwards of "three-fourths or more" of the people of the South were interested in slaves ("The non-slaveholders of the South" DeBow's Review, XXX., 67-77.; D. W. Mitchel, *Ten Years in the United States, London,* 1862). Were the non-slaveholders ruled by the slaveholders? Were they servile in any sense? The fact is that "servility" was the very last charge to be brought against a white man in the South. The writer in DeBow's Review says: "No white man at the South serves another as a body-servant, to clean his boots wait on his table, and perform the menial services of his household! His blood revolts against this, and his necessities never drive him to it. He is a companion and an equal. When in the employ of the slaveholder, or in intercourse with him, he enters his hall, and has a seat at his table. If a distinction exists, it is only that which education and refinement may give, and this is so courteously exhibited as scarcely to strike attention. The poor white laborer at the North is at the bottom of the social ladder, while his brother here has ascended several steps, and can look down upon those who are beneath him at an indefinite remove."

Did slavery prevent the non-slaveholders from rising in the social scale? The facts do not bear out the idea. The following statement is from the same article in DeBow's Review:

"*The large slaveholders and proprietors of the South begin life in great part as non-slaveholders.* It is the nature of property to change hands. Luxury, liberality, extravagance, depreciated land, low prices, rent, distribution among children, are continually breaking up estates. All over the new States of the Southwest enormous estates are in the hands of men who began life as overseers or city clerks, traders and merchants. Often the overseer marries the widow. Cheap lands, abundant harvests, high prices, give the poor man soon a negro. His ten bales of cotton bring him another, a second crop adding labor, until in a few years his draft for $20,000 upon his merchant becomes a very marketable commodity.

But should such fortune not be in reserve for the non-slaveholder, he will understand that by honesty and industry it may be realized to his children. More than one generation of poverty in a family is scarcely to be expected at the South, and is against the general experience. It is more unusual here for poverty than wealth to be preserved through several generations in the same family.

The sons of the non-slaveholder are and have always been among the leading and ruling spirits of the South, in industry as well as in politics. Every man's experience in his own neighborhood will evince this. He has but to task his memory. In this class are the McDuffies, Langdon Cheeveses, Andrew Jacksons, Henry Clays, and Rusks, of the past; the Hammonds, Yanceys, Orrs, Memmingers, Benjamins, Stephens, Soules, Browns of Mississippi, Simms, Porters, Magraths, Aikens, Maunsel, Whites, and an innumerable host of the present, and what is to be noted, these men have not been made demagogues for that reason, as in other quarters, but are among the most conservative among us. Nowhere else have intelligence and virtue, disconnected from ancestral estates the same opportunities for advancement, and nowhere else is their triumph more speedy and signal."

The following is from Samuel M. Wolfe, of Virginia, in his "Helper's Impending Crisis Dissolved" (1860):

"A comparative statement would show quite as many men of wealth, quite as many, too, going up and down the scale of fortune, quite as many enjoying fame, and they, too, passing up and down the elevator of circumstances, which contributed to put men in and out of power and place, at the South as there are at the North, and these mutations were not confined to any class or condition in life. * * * There are many distinguished instances of the poor man, the mechanic, men of various vocations in life, who "earned their bread by the sweat of their brow," at the South, who have acquired wealth, high responsiblity and wide-spread favor, as liberal and enlightened statesmen. We will take the liberty of giving the names of some of these living instances — Honorables Messrs. Johnson,[1] Jimmie Jones,[2] G. W. Jones[3] and Stanton,[4] of Tennessee; Stanton,[5] of Kentucky; Governor Letcher[6] and McMullen,[7] of Virginia; Orr[8] and Ashmore,[9] of South Carolina; Stephens[10] and Brown,[11] Governor, of Georgia. The first of this galaxy of great and talented men in the South who have risen from the humble to the higher walks of life, and who is as much respected as any gentleman in our land, was in his early life a tailor by trade (his sign still hangs over his old shop in the town where he lives in Tennessee) and, withall, the people of that Southern State respect him enough to honor him with a seat in the United States Senate. "Jimmie Jones" was a blacksmith, and his stalwart blows were honored with high State and National positions. George W. Jones is a saddler by trade, the Stantons are bricklayers, Letcher a house carpenter, McMullen was a wagoner; Stephens was a physician incapable of labor, but was poor, and had to work his way to position as best he could. The present Governor of Georgia was of very obscure origin. Orr was poor, and Ashmore was unlearned and penniless, until by the dint of his own labor he acquired means and education."

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[1] Andrew Johnson, President of the United States.

[2] James C. Jones, governor and U. S. Senator.

[3] G. W. Jones, member of Congress.

[4] Frederick P. Stanton, member of Congress, and governor of Kansas Territory.

[5] Richard Henry Stanton, member of Congress.

[6] John Letcher, governor of Virginia (1861-1865).

[7] Fayette McMullen, member of U. S. and C. S. Congresses.

[8] James L. Orr, member of U. S. and C. S. Congresses.

[9] John Durant Ashmore, member of Congress.

[10] Alexander H. Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy.

[11] Joseph E. Brown, governor of Georgia (1856-1864).